

NEWSRELEASE

Montana Department of Corrections • 1539 11th Avenue
Helena, Montana 59620 • 444-3930 • Fax: 444-4920



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Monday, Dec. 17, 2007

CONTACT: Steve Barry, 444-0406, or Myrna Kuka, 454-6756

Kuka named American Indian liaison for Corrections Department

Myrna Kuka, who has worked in the corrections field for 22 years, is the new American Indian liaison for the Montana Department of Corrections.

Kuka will take over as the department's fourth liaison Jan. 2.

The position is critical to the department as it continues to meet native cultural needs through appropriate offender programming in both community corrections services and secure facilities. American Indians make up a disproportionately large segment of Montana's offender population, accounting for about 18 percent of all inmates. In contrast, American Indians represent about 6.3 percent of the state's total population.

In addition to dealing with native cultural issues within the corrections system, Kuka will develop new initiatives to increase the number of American Indian employees in the department, particularly among probation and parole officers.

For the past year and a half, she has worked as the agency's first native cultural officer, a position designed to help address the cultural and communication barriers encountered by Indian offenders in the criminal justice system.

"Myrna brings a strong understanding of the cultural needs of American Indian offenders within the correctional system," said Steve Barry, administrator of the department's Human Resources Division that includes Kuka's office. "Through her work in development of the native cultural officer program, she has built strong relationships with tribal and department officials and is widely respected for her work ethic and commitment to the department and native community."

Kuka, 60, was selected from a pool of 23 applicants. Born in Browning, she is a member of the Blackfeet Tribe and holds a bachelor's degree in native American human services and an associate's degree in chemical dependency.

Kuka said she is looking forward to dealing with correctional issues on a statewide basis and resolving Indian cultural problems that arise in the corrections system.

"This job is important in bridging the differences between cultures that show up as misunderstandings and communication gaps," she said.

Her tribal affiliation is a key asset in the position and in dealing with American Indians, Kuka added. "I can let them know I work for a different culture, but they can be comfortable in expressing their needs and concerns."

Kuka replaces Jim Mason, who resigned in late August after almost three years in the job.

##